

Class wars: debate intensifies over "full inclusion"

The title of a recent American Federation of Teachers workshop session—"Inclusion: Solution or Nightmare?"—is just one indication of how deeply educators are divided over one of the most hotly debated issues in special education today.

Full inclusion, the placement of disabled children in regular public school classrooms, is the latest trend in education for the disabled. While previous mainstreaming efforts were intended for mildly handicapped children, and mainstreamed children generally spent much of their day in special education classrooms, full inclusion involves placing even severely physically and mentally handicapped children in regular classes—often for most of the school day. Furthermore, it requires teachers to adapt regular class curricula to be relevant for both non-disabled and disabled students. At its most extreme, inclusion calls for the complete dismantling of the special education system: as Pearpoint and Forest stated in 1992, "the inclusion option signifies the end of labeling, special education, and special classes."

Full-inclusion policies are being adopted at a rapid rate by school districts, whose administrators say that neither disabled or non-disabled students benefitted from special education "segregation." They argue that disabled students profit greatly from social interaction with non-disabled peers, and that non-disabled students may develop a greater understanding of people who are different.

The courts, too, are viewing full inclusion as progressive step, reminiscent of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling that ended school segregation. Recently a federal district court in New Jersey ruled that schools should be precluded from implementing separate special education placements unless they can prove that such placements are necessary to confer some educational benefit on students. According to Allan Osborne, Jr., the court ruled that "to exclude a student from the mainstream...a school district must reasonably demonstrate that accommodating the student would require either a modification of the essential nature of the program or impose an undue burden."

Until recently, Osborne notes, courts have deferred to the judgment of school district officials as to which students could be included in regular classes and which needed separate services. The new ruling, he says, "may introduce a new level of judicial intervention in special education placement decisions."

The court's enthusiasm for full inclusion, however, apparently is not shared by most of the teachers actually implementing full inclusion programs. When a recent poll asked New York City teachers to assess the success of full inclusion, only three of 126 responses were positive. And in May 1993, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) issued a statement charging that "thousands of teachers nationwide are being thrown into frustrating situations in which school systems rush to include disabled children into regular classes without proper planning or support services, possibly to save money." Spokesperson Eugenia Kemble said that

"with little or no training and often without an aide, teachers must cope with the demands of 25 to 30 or more students, including those with disabilities that may range from severe cerebral palsy to behavioral disorders. There is little hope that any student can get the proper attention when inclusion is poorly planned."

The AFT is calling for "a full range of educational placement opportunities," rather than a full-inclusion-only approach to special education. In addition, they say, full inclusion programs can succeed only if teachers and aides receive extensive training and support, staffing levels are adequate.

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classroom staff's and parents' concerns are fully addressed, and frequent reviews are conducted to determine whether or not the programs are actually working.

The AFT statement was quickly followed by similar statements from other national organizations:

—The Council for Learning Disabilities issued a statement saying that "one policy that the Council CANNOT SUPPORT is the indiscriminate full-time placement of ALL students with LD in the regular education classroom," and adding that "CLD has grave concerns about any placement policy that ignores a critical component of special education service delivery: program placement of each student should be based on an evaluation of that student's individual needs."

—The Learning Disabilities Association of America issued a statement saying that "the regular education classroom is not the appropriate placement for a number of students with learning disabilities who may need alternative instructional environments, teaching strategies, and/or materials that cannot or will not be provided within the context of a regular classroom placement." The LDA added that "the placement of ALL children with disabilities in the regular classroom is as great a violation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as is the placement of ALL children in separate classrooms on the basis of their type of disability."

—A statement from The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities declared, "One aspect of school reform that the NJCLD cannot support is the idea that all students with learning disabilities must be served only in regular education classrooms, frequently referred to as full inclusion. The

Committee believes that full inclusion, when defined this way, violates the rights of parents and students with disabilities as mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act."

The Council for Exceptional Children recently weighed in on the issue too, charging that "a scarcity of resources is propelling full inclusion forward at the expense of focusing on meeting the educational needs of the student."

Lawsuits—pro and con

Increasingly, parents and teachers are becoming dissatisfied with school districts' stands on full inclusion, and are taking legal action—but for differing reasons.

A lawsuit filed in July by teachers and parents in Baltimore County, for instance, charges that students' and teachers' needs are being disregarded by administrators who are using full inclusion as a means of saving money. The lawsuit, filed by the Teachers Association of Baltimore County, two chapters of the Learning Disabilities Association, and several parents, asks that the school district be prevented from moving any students from special education classes or schools without due legal process, and calls for the restoration of such programs to their original level of staffing, services, and equipment.

Proponents of full inclusion, on the other hand, fault school districts for not moving fast enough to place students in regular classrooms. An organization called Schools Are for Everyone filed a discrimination complaint with the Office of Civil Rights in April 1993, charging that the Dade school district in Florida is violating the civil rights of special education students, who do not eat with other students and use separate school entrances.

And still another lawsuit has been filed by three teachers in Birmingham, Alabama, who charge that because of their district's full inclusion policy, they are forced to administer medical procedures to students without proper training or professional assistance.

"Several lessons can be learned from 'Educating Peter documentary,' statement from the American Federation of Teachers, May 6, 1993. Address: Janet Bass, AFT, 555 New Jersey Ave. N.W., Washington, DC 20001-2079.

—and—
"Case note update," Allan Osborne, Jr., NOLPE, April 1993, pp. 4-5.

—and—
"Suit filed over special education transfer," Mary Maushard, *Baltimore Sun*, July 24, 1993.

—and—
"Issue of school 'inclusion' splits families of disabled," Marilyn Marks, *Miami Herald*, May 28, 1993.

—and—
"Teachers expressing concern about inclusion movement," *Education Daily*, July 15, 1993.

—and—
"Position paper on full inclusion of all students with learning disabilities in the regular education classroom," statement of the Learning Disabilities Association of America, *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, Vol. 26, No. 9, November 1993, p. 594.

—and—
"Concerns about the full inclusion of students with learning disabilities in regular education classrooms," statement of the Council for Learning Disabilities, *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, Vol. 26, No. 9, November 1993, p. 595.

—and—
"A reaction to full inclusion: a reaffirmation of the right of students with learning disabilities to a continuum of services," statement of the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, Vol. 26, No. 9, November 1993, p. 596.